

## Prologue

Her dress is the colour of teal. She lies on the hood of a car, flecked by a thousand shards of glass. Wet blonde hair fanned out, limbs splayed, face bruised and smeared with blood. For a few desperate seconds, she wants to believe this is all a bad dream. She wants to look at someone else, to be alive again and sit snug in the warmth of her home, away from the rain and the soggy road. Twelve feet above, she floats as pale and translucent as a moon. Weightless.

*Please,* she begs.

White shadows swim around her, they fade in and out, move their mouths, call her name. She shakes her head no because she's not sure she can face it. Someone else needs to know, the deceit, the fear, and the lies.

The control.

She sees the tail of headlights in the distance, two red eyes fading into the dark. She should never have trusted her.

*Never.*

Something radiates through the dress. A glow, a light. A pulsing energy seeps through the weave. She can almost taste it, like a breath, pumping through the lines of the silk, the dark teal blue rising and dipping in cold folds.

The counter was chipped, finger-stained, and tatty. I pushed my coins across to the clerk and grabbed my supplies for the day: a pack of mint gum, a tin of coffee beans, and a carton of milk. Low fat, with a black-and-white drawing of a skinny cow.

My journey back home was only a short walk down Goswell Street, Chertsey, in Surrey. Two dull rows of Victorian brickwork livened up by house signs and snippets of daily life. Dwellings populated by retirees and young-ish professionals that were mostly parents priced out of London. At twenty-six, single and jobless, I could see for myself that I didn't fit the local profile.

A mother wheeled out a double buggy with twin toddlers through the door of number 20, followed by a spaniel yapping at her heels. Wheels again at number 27, on the opposite side where an old lady shuffled half steps with the help of a Zimmer frame. The washing machine at number 36 changed pitch as it drummed into its spinning cycle.

When I reached number 48, I caught a strange sight. There was a smudge between the two rows of house roofs. A band of clear blue sky marred by a curious shape. Grey like a wisp of cigarette smoke, fluid and fast. Growing in size as it swooped down into a dive.

I slowed to a stop, held up my free hand to shade my eyes and blinked. Beautiful sunshine, taintless sky—almost. It looked so surreal I wondered if I was hallucinating. Surely I could only be gazing at . . .

A cloud?

A *diving* cloud?

Not that I'd heard of such a thing before. I couldn't remember much of my GCSE science classes, a decade old and marred by the memory of doodles and boredom. But I knew in my gut this wasn't just a cloud.

*Relax, Chloe. Take a deep breath.*

I gulped air, trying to dislodge the knot of anxiety forming in my chest. My mother used to chide me for telling strange stories when I was a child; I couldn't help it. I caught sight of things that she never seemed to see, sensed lives that slipped unnoticed before her eyes.

Before all eyes.

I gazed up once more at the sky.

*Dive, dive, dive. Low, low, low. Close, close, close.*

Too close.

The tightness in my chest wouldn't go away. It couldn't, because there was something else, a sudden change. A very *odd* change. A morphing from fluid to solid, from grey to colour, and the result: a square of light pulsing teal blue. I watched it alight in the distance, a hundred yards away from me, and then, in the blink of an eye, it was gone, vanished from view.

I lived in number 92 Flat B. It was the only house in Goswell Street to have been turned into flats—five rental one-beds, self-contained, dingy and dated. Only two of them were filled. The outside looked no better: a rather joyless parody of Halloween with a creaky old bench on which sat a headless gnome; sticky spider webs swathed around the walls of the front porch – though the sight of it was obscured by someone. Standing between me and home was a familiar shape, a woman, her back turned to me, and I paused in my steps to stare at her. It was my next-door neighbour at number 90: buxomed, nosy Mrs. Ward, who I caught peering greedily towards my front door. Six months in Goswell Street had taught me to beware of Mrs. Ward. But for now, something in her behaviour struck me as odd.

She began to bend at the waist over our shared side fence, one leg raised in the air, a wooden clog dangling off her toes. The rest of her I couldn't see, but I could picture the tangled fall of her grey hair hovering beside my ground-floor sash window, where the curtains of my living room were drawn tightly shut.

A wave of unease washed over me. I still couldn't make sense of that shape-shifting, light-pulsing, diving cloud. It sounded so absurd, but I couldn't make sense of Mrs. Ward's silly acrobatics either. My ears were attuned to the sounds that came out of her mouth: a shriek, a squeal of delight, a frustrated sigh. Odd combination. Maybe she was stuck. I wondered if she was snooping again.

I crept a couple of steps closer.

Through a gap between rotting wooden planks, I glimpsed outstretched fingers reaching out towards my doorstep. I looked up and saw the familiar row of clay pots balanced precariously on the first-floor window ledge. Maybe one of them had dropped. They belonged to Flat D: the

dark-haired Irish bloke whom I'd met twice before, picking up his mail from the hall floor, bleary-eyed and dopey. I hoped Mrs. Ward didn't think he was growing parsley.

I grew progressively more edgy, the cold wind flapping at my coat, the old bench squeaking creepily. A group of men jogging along the pavement, casting annoyed looks my way for blocking their path.

Mrs. Ward's dangling clog dropped to the ground with a dull thud. Above me, a sudden shriek had me looking up—the call of a crow, stirring and cawing at something in the shadows. Mrs. Ward looked up, too, then whipped her head in my direction.

“Chloe. What a pleasure to see you, luv.”

I waved a hand.

“Hello, Mrs. Ward,” I said warily.

My palms were clammy as she undraped herself (ungracefully) from the fence, her cheeks flushed red from the effort. She slipped her bare foot back into her clog and flicked her gaze to my carrier bag. “Been shopping?”

“Coffee,” I said, fiddling nervously with the milk cap. Not that Mrs. Ward bothered to argue the logic. She kept sneaking looks over the fence.

“Fabulous bluebells you have, luv. Spanish type I bet, eh?”

I stared at her blankly. Truth is, I don't know much about flowers, but I knew that narrow strip of flowerbed contained little more than drooping weeds and a few unbloomed buds. Bluebells or not, I doubted they looked *fabulous*—unless they had undergone a miraculous growth spurt while I'd nipped across to the corner shop.

Mrs. Ward gave a strained little laugh, as if reading my thoughts. “Dead roots always come back to life, luv. Spring is a time of rebirth.”

*Dead . . . Rebirth . . .*

I didn't know why she said those words. Something about them disturbed me, brought back unwanted, vivid images from the past. Haunting images. The square of teal-blue light crawled back into my head.

“What do you mean, Mrs. Ward?” I said, my voice shaky.

Her cheeks flared a shade of scarlet as she grunted something unintelligible in reply. She refused to meet my stare, grabbed her broom by the wall and began to sweep her front yard (or

rather made a feeble attempt at it). If anything, her behaviour confirmed my suspicions—something on my side of the fence had caught her attention.

I strode towards the rusty gate, put my hand on the latch, opened it, made my way up the path.

And then I saw it.

Propped on the porch step lay the object of my neighbour's curiosity: a square box wrapped in dark teal-blue paper and tied with a ribbon of gold satin hearts. Elegance laced with sweetness.

I sighed with relief, soothed for a moment by the sight. Then I stooped to pick up the box and ran my fingers across the smooth surface; the paper only dented by the mention of my name in a beautiful but unfamiliar cursive hand. There was no postmark, no address, no hint of the sender's identity. Whoever had hand-delivered this box clearly knew I'd moved to Chertsey last autumn.

I caught my breath, fumbled about in my coat pocket for my keys, found them, then startled when Mrs. Ward cleared her throat from behind, a stagy *ahem*. I glanced to see she had stopped sweeping mid-stroke.

"Not your birthday, is it?"

I shook my head. When I jiggled the box, I caught a faint rustle of movement. Definitely not chocolates.

Mrs. Ward eyed it with a knowing grin. "Must come from a caring young lad."

I frowned. There was no caring young lad in my life, never had been. At least not the caring part. She probably got carried away by the gold hearts on the ribbon.

"Just a friend," I lied.

"Pshaw! A pretty box like this, that's 'just a friend?'" She clawed at the fence and leaned towards me, adding, "See what I'm talking about, luv?" She pointed then to the handwriting on the box. "You must be well acquainted with your lad—otherwise he wouldn't call you *Chlo*. Cute nickname, isn't it?"

I dropped my gaze and gaped at the line. It should have meant nothing, just a missing 'e' at the end of my name. It was so imperceptible against the deep blue of the paper that I'd misread it. But now the word stared at me like a familiar ghost from the past. Only one person I knew would ever use the shortened form of my name.

Except it was simply impossible.

It couldn't be him.

He was dead and buried near Heavendale, miles away up north.

"Are you all right, luv?" Mrs. Ward asked, a look of exaggerated concern on her face. "You're white as a sheet. I bet you could do with a stiff brandy at mine."

I flashed her a tense smile. "Thanks, but I think I'll pass."

"Oh, that's a shame. Mrs. Hunt is coming soon, and I bet she'd love a cuppa and a little chat with us. Just like last week. That was nice, wasn't it, luv?"

I forced a polite nod, even though I wanted her to go away. I didn't want to see the stout Mrs. Hunt again and have to squeeze into the sofa between her and Mrs. Ward, the three of us knocking back cups of warm brandy infused with Earl Grey that passed as afternoon tea.

The conversation between them had rattled at whipcrack speed, from the sexual antics of next door's pert German au pair to the marriage counselling of the couple in number 33. Two cups of *special* tea later, they'd firmly believed the two topics were related. Then, when they both ran out of scandalous neighbourhood tales, they turned their woozy gazes towards me.

"Why did you move into that dump next door, luv?"

*Well, I don't mind a decorating challenge, Mrs. Ward.*

"You sure you're eating enough? You're all skin and bones."

*That's because I'm blessed with a fast metabolism, Mrs. Hunt.* Her mouth had set in a tight-lipped line. I don't think she liked my answer very much.

"So, did you have a boyfriend before moving to Goswell Street?"

*No.*

Mrs. Ward had looked contented and mellow enough, but not Mrs. Hunt. I don't think she believed me. She'd just said, "Oh, really," with a knowing little smile, and I could tell she meant something else. I had to look away.

I pushed back the memory and slid the key into the lock.

"I heard Heavendale is a nice place to go in spring," Mrs. Ward suddenly said and I whipped round to face her.

*Why did she say that? Was it random?* I couldn't read the look on her face so I gave her the benefit of the doubt.

"You've not gone back there for a while, have you, luv?"

I wondered now if under the grip of hot brandy I'd unwittingly parted with more information than I intended to last time. I found myself reaching for the milk cap again, twisting it right, then left, right and left again—a nervous tic.

“I'll go back soon,” I muttered. “To visit my mother.” *God forbid.*

“Mrs. Hunt knows Heavendale well. She goes there on holiday every year.”

“Wonderful.”

“She was there last April.”

My hand froze mid-twist; I could see her eyes sparking with excitement, with glee—a chance to probe again into my past. I had a sudden fear of what was about to come next.

“What a tragic accident. Poor boy. What was his name again?” She gave an exaggerated pause. “Oh yes, Matthew. Matthew Thorne.”

The name shot through me like an electric charge but Mrs. Ward carried on, oblivious: “Speed driving is such an awful distraction for young men. You shouldn't be grieving—oh no, certainly not at your age. Funerals are bloody awful, luv. I remember when I lost my Archie three years ago . . .”

Blood rang in my ears. I didn't want to listen any more. I tried not to, but the sound of her voice kept coming at me. Loud. Urgent. Relentless. She had to stop, she had to shut up right now.

I dropped my carrier bag and slammed my fist against the door. “Enough,” I yelled. “I have no idea what you're talking about.”

“But Mrs. Hunt . . .” Her face crumpled for a second. “She saw his name in a local paper. She found out the two of you were engaged. You were going to get married.”

I swallowed past the dryness in my throat, tried to soften the tone of my voice when I said, “Chloe Westfield is a common name. She must have got the wrong end of the stick, that's all. I've never met a Matthew Thorne in my life. Ever.”

The words came out hollow. They rang false, even to me, but at last Mrs. Ward lapsed into silence. I picked up my carrier bag and pushed the front door open with trembling hands. And then, just like that, a crucial question popped into my head.

“Did you see who delivered the box, Mrs. Ward?”

There was an awkward pause, an odd hesitation and I looked over my shoulder to see her mouth opening and closing. She rubbed her chin for a moment, as if she wasn't sure what to say next.

“Not being funny, luv,” she started, “but one second there was nothing, then the next—BAM. Just like that. It was there on your porch step.” She crossed her arms over her chest, looking mightily annoyed. “Your lad must have been so damn discreet.”

I said nothing, certain I’d stopped breathing. My legs wobbling, I shuffled through the communal hall and opened the door to my flat, stumbling inside, the teal-blue box flying down to the floor.

I gasped.

It was happening again. Just like when I was a child. The bile crawled up the back of my throat, an acid taste of fear coating my tongue as I latched the door behind me. Two bolts, one chain. Pointless precaution.

I had let it in, the danger—here inside, waiting to be unwrapped.

In my head, I could still see that grey cloud morphing into a square of light, the colour pulsing a dark shade of teal.